

V, Kettenbrückengasse 21

Alexander Neugebauer and Franziska Neugebauer (née Deutsch), their only daughter Emilie and her husband Eugen Günsberger, Leopold (“Uncle Julius”) Deutsch, younger brother of Franziska.

It was Vienna, May 1942. Some time before that, Alexander and Franziska had been moved from the *Sammelwohnungen* (enforced communal housing) at IX, Servitengasse 20 to the nearby Old Age Home at Seegasse 9. However, Alexander was 79 years old, infirm and unwell and had senile dementia, and he had then been transferred from the Old Age Home to the Rothschild Hospital. Franziska, his wife of 52 years, aged 74, was still in the Old Age Home. Her health was somewhat better than Alexander’s. Their two grandsons – the sons of Eugen and Emilie – had been able to leave Vienna. Hans, the older one, had gone to Australia, aged 27 when he left in August 1939. Fritz, my father, had gone to Shanghai, aged 25 when he left at the end of January 1941.

They were times of incredible stress and uncertainty for the family, but tragedy upon tragedy was about to unfold.

On Friday night, 15 May, Franziska’s brother Leopold, aged 66, was deported to Izbica, Poland, together with 1,000 or more other Jews. He may have managed to stay alive there for a short time, but it is known that Izbica soon became a kind of waiting room for the ultimate transport to the nearby Belzec gas chambers, or possibly to Sobibor. And it is also known that none of the total of 4,000 Austrian Jews who were deported to Izbica survived.

Two weeks later, Franziska and Alexander’s only daughter Emilie and Eugen their son-in-law were deported from Vienna to Maly Trostinec, near Minsk, on Tuesday 2 June together with 998 other Jews. After a horrendous journey of seven days, all who had arrived alive were taken out and murdered in mobile gassing vans or possibly by shooting.

Then, to add to Franziska’s grief and distress, one month later, on Sunday 5 July, Alexander died in hospital. One record says that the cause was “*herzlähmung*” (heart paralysis), but it is well known and widely documented that the Nazis used fatal doses of injections to kill people who were old and/or sick. The medical report of their underlying condition was used as the basis for fabricating a plausible but fake cause of death to go on a certificate. And “*herzlähmung*” was a common term that was used in the subsequent official cause of death. After all, if someone is administered a fatal injection, you would expect their heart to stop!

Some weeks later, on Thursday 20 August 1942, Franziska was taken from the Old Age Home and deported to Theresienstadt. She died there, nine months later, on Sunday 30 May 1943.

These people were my family – they *are* my family. But what were they like? What did they do? Where did they come from? My father had written down some of his memoirs and had also told my two sisters and me some of the family’s story. We are privileged to have it. Following is some of that story.

Alexander was born in May 1863 in Holíč, about 75km north of Bratislava, in what is now Slovakia. He came to Vienna as a teenager. In time he owned and operated a very successful wholesale and retail food and general goods business in the 2nd district.

Franziska was born in November 1867. She had a younger sister Regina (born 1872) and a then a brother David Leopold (born 1876). The three of them were born in Trenčín, about 120km north-east of Bratislava, also in what is now Slovakia. Their parents divorced, and the three children moved to Vienna with their mother, Leopoldina Deutsch, when Franziska was a teenager.

Alexander and Franziska were married in June 1890 and lived in the then upper middle class 18th district of Vienna, where their only daughter Emilie was born in 1891. We know very little about Emilie’s early

childhood, other than that she had difficulty in saying her home address (Staudgasse 24), and would pronounce it as “Taugasse vie-un-wansig”. On completing high school, she went to Neuchâtel Switzerland for a year, to a high class finishing school for upper middle class young ladies, after which they were expected to find fine husbands and be able to manage households with a number of servants.

Leopold was just a child when he came with his mother and two sisters to Vienna. It seems that he adapted well to the change, and applied himself to his studies, as in time he earned the title Ing. Leopold Deutsch. He was a mechanical engineer by profession, and was a manager and Technische Beamter (Technical Officer) of the large mechanical supplies company called Persicaner & Co. GmbH. He never married, and he lived a very frugal life in a mezzanine apartment in II, Grosse Mohrengasse. In the family he was known as “Uncle Julius”, not just by his niece Emilie, but also by his two grand-nephews Hans and Fritz.

Meanwhile, Eugen Günsberger, who had been born in August 1879 in Kám, a small town in western Hungary and lived as a young boy on the family farm nearby, had moved to Vienna as a teenager. He secured an apprenticeship with a large wholesale and retail haberdashery firm. He then began making and selling his own line of household and office needs. His best-selling line became a special liquid to kill bed bugs which were infesting many homes. He expanded his business further, making soaps and other products. His business principle was, “I make the product that my customer wants.” This principle guided him through the years, with further expansions of the business.

It was almost inevitable that Alexander Neugebauer, with his business, became one of Eugen Günsberger’s best customers. One day Eugen went to the Neugebauer home to show Alexander some new products. There he met Alexander and Franziska’s daughter Emilie. Evidently, Eugen being eleven years older than Emilie was not a barrier to their getting to know one another, for they were married in the spring of 1911.

All of the dowry and a hefty bank loan went into building a large state-of-the-art soap and washing powder factory. When World War I broke out, the factory was requisitioned by the authorities to refine saltpetre, an important ingredient of gunpowder.

Eugen and Emilie’s first child, Hans, was born in April 1912. Their second child, Fritz, my father, was born in October 1916. When WW1 broke out, Eugen volunteered, reaching the rank of non-commissioned officer.

Towards the end of WW1, because Franziska was suffering progressively from rheumatoid arthritis and needed more and more care, she and Alexander sold their business and bought the “haus” with its 28 apartments on the corner of Weimarerstraße (then called Karl Ludwigstraße) and Gentzgasse 57. They moved into one of the apartments.

In 1919 Eugen and Emilie sold their factory and started a large scale import export business, buying large lots of heavy industrial chemicals abroad. They moved with their two sons into an apartment in Haizingergasse 27, only a few minutes walk from Alexander and Franziska. They also bought a large piece of land 300 metres west on Haizingergasse at the corner of what is now Gregor Mendelstraße, on which to build their dream home. It was at that time a most prestigious district of Vienna. Emilie worked in the business as her husband’s private secretary, taking down his letters in shorthand and then typing them, perhaps improving the style a little.

The import business was growing fast, and in 1921 Eugen realised his long held dream, engaging the leading architect Adolf Loos (1870-1933) to design and supervise the building of a three-storey mansion with a large office and an attic. The building was fitted with the latest comforts and gadgets including more than a dozen intercom telephones throughout, and remote-controlled heavy iron gates operated from a number of strategically placed buttons. There was accommodation for the family, guests and servants. My father and his brother had fond memories of the years that the family lived in “the villa”, as they called it. Emilie would practise the French which she still remembered from her year in the finishing school, and she would play occasionally on the high quality piano. On fine Sunday mornings

Eugen would prepare freshly ground coffee to drink with Emilie in the garden, the table being graced with flowers which he had freshly cut from the garden. He drove a big American car – a 2-litre V8 General Motors Oakland – his pride and joy, and parked it in the large double garage on the property. Life was good then.

However, after a few years the importing business became very difficult, and with a heavy heart they sold the villa in 1926 and used the capital to buy an existing wholesale and retail business in chemicals, the “Aktiengesellschaft für Drogen- und Chemikalienhandel” at V, Kettenbrückengasse 21. Around that time the apartment next to Alexander and Franziska became vacant, and the Günsberger family moved in. Some internal wall sections were removed, the passage between the two apartments was incorporated and a few rooms were combined. The two apartments (10&11) were thus joined together and made into a very commodious double apartment.

The Kettenbrückengasse business was owned by the family in five shares: Alexander and Franziska, Eugen and Emilie, plus “Uncle Julius” – Franziska’s younger brother Leopold. Uncle Julius was in effect a “silent partner” in the family business, having little active involvement. His full-time position in the mechanical supplies company would have left him little time for other business ventures..

Eugen extended his old business principle of giving the customer what he wants, by going out of his way to provide his customers even with services that were not exactly in line with the business. In so doing, he built up the business during the Great Depression to become one of the largest concerns of its type in Vienna. He was in charge of the wholesale trade, and in time they had the widest selection of goods in stock and several retail outlets including one in Ottakringerstrasse. Alexander was officially the cashier and treasurer. He went with Eugen and Emilie every day to the main business in Kettenbrückengasse 21, leaving home early in the morning, being driven home for a hurried lunch, then back to the business and coming home late in the evening. That was six days a week. Emilie was in charge of the retail outlet. She also kept complete and accurate records of all purchases. Franziska ran the household, doing most of the shopping and all of the cooking, and a housemaid did all the heavy work.

Hans, my father’s older brother, worked in the Ottakringerstrasse shop, specialising in medicinal herbs. My father was a student at the prestigious Theresianum high school in Favoritenstraße. At 6.00pm when the school day finished, he would walk to the Kettenbrückengasse business, where he would hear and learn about the business. Then they would all go home together. At the end of his fourth year of school my father won a coveted position in the Höhere Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt für chemische Industrie, an accelerated learning institution in Rosensteingasse, which was part of World ORT. Over the next four years he learned industrial chemistry, business management and accounting. After four years there he graduated at the end of the 1936 academic year, having earned the right to call himself “Ing. F. Günsberger”. He then spent six months in London to experience practical British business methods and to fine tune his English language skills, and he returned home to join the family business full time.

With the Anschluss on the weekend of 12-13 March 1938, everything began to change, and change quickly. On the morning of Monday 14 March the assistant manager, who had been a member of an illegal Nazi cadre, arrived in his high ranking SS officer’s uniform. He warned Eugen that Jewish people were being taken out of their cars and sent to concentration camps, and the cars simply changed ownership. It wasn’t difficult to convince Eugen to hand over the V8 Oakland as well as several rifles and hand guns which, if discovered, would have led to dire consequences for the family.

On or just after Kristallnacht, Alexander and Eugen were taken and imprisoned, with the intention of sending them and thousands of other Jews to Dachau or another death camp. Emilie was able to phone the Nazi assistant manager and he arrived in what used to be the family’s car, now adorned with two swastika flags and his rank insignia on the front mudguards. Emilie told him what had happened. He drove to all the collection points in the area and eventually found Alexander and Eugen. He demanded that they be handed over to him “for special treatment”, as he said he had something to settle with them. He grabbed them by the scruff of their necks, shoved them in the back of the car and drove them back to the apartment, warning them to hide in the cellar for a few days until things quietened down.

Shortly after, a consortium having the best Nazi party connections contacted Eugen, ostensibly to buy the business at the full value of the stock. In fact they had virtually no experience in that or any other type of business, and they took it over without ever paying anything. From then on, no member of the family was wanted there, or even allowed to be there. The family found out later that the consortium sold the business after about a year, for a considerable sum.

The consortium tried to extort money from Eugen, but without success, so they laid false charges against him, claiming large scale fraud in company tax and customs duty. He was taken into police custody at the Morzinplatz awaiting trial. He was released five months later, but he was a broken, frightened man. He rarely left the apartment, and when he did he walked with his back close to the houses and was frightened to cross a street. He never told the family what he had to endure there.

All Jewish bank accounts were frozen by government order, and only a small monthly allowance could be withdrawn. However, this was scarcely enough. Neighbours in the apartment directly opposite the family helped them with extra food, in spite of the risks involved. Eugen was able to generate some income using his years of experience in industrial chemicals to make a few products which he sold in various ways. Later he was appointed adviser to the still existing Jewish emigration authority to advise people on the best chemical products to manufacture if and when they might manage to emigrate. Later still he was appointed to further functions at the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde under Gestapo supervision.

Desperate attempts had been made by the family to obtain exit visas for all but Alexander, as he was too frail to travel. However, after unbelievable and exhausting effort and at exorbitant cost, there had been success only for my father and his brother.

Although unable to leave Vienna, Uncle Julius assisted my father by paying for much of the cost of the journey to Shanghai. The money came from Uncle Julius' frozen bank account, which had ample funds, but it had to be converted to German currency at one tenth of the official exchange rate. Uncle Julius gave further assistance to my father by providing him with tools that could be useful in Shanghai. Uncle Julius, being an engineer with a very precise mind, had insisted on a detailed, very specific list.

With Hans safe in Australia and my father relatively safe in Shanghai, many letters were written and sent between my father and his parents, still in Vienna, but hoping and planning to leave there soon and join my father. There were also some letters from his grandmother Franziska, sent through a family acquaintance in Switzerland. The last letter my father received from Franziska bore the awful news of his parents' deportation to Maly Trostinec on Tuesday 2 June 1942, the deportation of Franziska's brother to Izbica two weeks earlier on Friday 15 May 1942 and the death of Franziska's husband in Vienna on Sunday 5 July. Six weeks after that, Franziska herself was deported to Theresienstadt, where she managed to stay alive for nine months, before being murdered on Sunday 30 May 1943.

Postscript

Hans bought a farm in Australia and became known as John. He married an Australian, and together with his amazing wife raised a family of six children. Their oldest daughter was named after Emilie; the next daughter was named after Franziska; and their third daughter was named after Eugen. Hans/ John passed away at the age of 94 on Shabbat 4 November 2006. Fritz, my father, married an extraordinary Viennese girl in Shanghai, and my older sister Rose was born there. After the war they were able to go to Australia, where he changed his name to Fred. I was born there and given the name Alexander as my second name. Then my younger sister was born and named Frances in memory of Franziska. Our father passed away at the age of 93 on the second night of Pesach, 2010 (30 March). And I now have some of the tools that Uncle Julius obtained for my father.

George Günsberger
Sydney, Australia, March 2013